

INTERVIEW WITH SENATOR WILLIAM BENTON - 4/28/56

NOELTNER: Senator Benton, you were formerly a Senator from the State of Connecticut, representing the people of that State from 1949 to 1953.

BENTON: Yes.

NOELTNER: As an experienced representative in a free country, we would like to address some questions to you with regard to the general concept of free Parliaments and of free society. Now, a Senator is elected for a six-year term. How is it that you served the people of your State for a period of four years in the U. S. Senate?

BENTON: Each State is entitled to two Senators -- that makes 96 Senators all together. In our Constitution, adopted in 1789, the States are divided into three groups. Every two years one group, or one-third of all the States, elects its Senators; thus, there would be 32 Senators up for election every two years. But there are vacancies in between these elections. Sometimes it takes a man a long time to get to the U. S. Senate -- he's a little old when he gets there; men die or they -- sometimes, but very rarely -- will take an appointment as a Federal Judge. Two-thirds of our Senators are lawyers, so about the only job they would take instead of the Senate would be a Judgeship. People in Europe don't understand the fact that none of our Senators would resign to be Cabinet officers. A Cabinet officer in this country comes to call on the Senator, not the other way around. A Senator represents a sovereign state under our legal definition as set forth in our Constitution. Therefore, if one dies or takes a Federal Judgeship, the Governor of the State -- because

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BENTON (Con'd) the State is entitled to two Senators -- has the right to appoint a substitute, who serves until the next election. But in the next election he couldn't run for a six-year term, or this would destroy the whole rhythm of the 32 Senators every two years. So he must run for the unexpired term of his predecessor. I was appointed by the Governor of Connecticut and served for a little over a year on appointment. Then, under the law, when the next election came I ran for the unexpired term.

NOELTNER: Do the people delegate the authority -- in other words, does the State Assembly delegate the authority to the Governor to appoint a Senator to fill an unexpired term?

BENTON: This was a Constitutional Amendment passed along about 1910 or so. Originally, the State Assembly elected the Senator, both for the six-year term or for the unexpired term. But there was a lot of politicking and some corruption. We don't want to tell your audience that we never have had any corruption in this country -- but when we catch up with it we fix it and change it. So we passed a Constitutional Amendment giving the Governor the power to appoint in a vacancy during a six-year term. But at the next election the man runs for the balance. I was elected in my first campaign. I hesitated to take the appointment because the Governor of my State wouldn't give it to me unless I promised to make the campaign and run a year later. But President Truman, who is sailing for Europe on May 11th Andeed, I am sailing with him on the UNITED STATES;

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BENTON(Con'd) we are good friends and I was with him in Kansas City only two or three weeks ago -- I admire him very greatly and served (in his Cabinet) in the State Department in his junior Cabinet⁷

said to me -- and I now think it's true, having gone through two campaigns -- he said, "A man in the United States can't learn anything about politics unless he runs for elective office." I accepted the appointment. This is something a Russian Presidium doesn't have to do. I then ran a year later and was elected. Then, when the time came for me to run for my six-year term for reelection, I was unhappily on the same ticket as a Democrat opposing General Eisenhower as a Republican. Unhappily for me, General Eisenhower swept the State of Connecticut. I would have been elected if Governor Stevenson had lost by as much as 41,000 votes. But he lost by 130,000 votes, and I lost by 88,000 votes -- and this ended my career as a Senator.

NOELTNER: How many people actually reside in the State of Connecticut -- or perhaps I should say, how many people did you represent?

BENTON: I represented a little over 2 million people and in our last election about 1,100,000 voted, or 93.5% of the registered voters of the State voted. There are always some who have died or moved away, and we think that we probably had a 95% vote of the people who were entitled to vote. This is a remarkable tribute to my State and to the interest of my State because there's no compulsion to vote in this country; there's no police officer watching you, there's no fellow coming into your house with a pistol on his hip and saying,

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"Now don't forget to vote tomorrow and to vote ya" -- you see, we have none of that. And for 95% to move out and vote -- this showed the tremendous interest of the people of my State in the 1952 election campaign, which elected General Eisenhower and which defeated me.

NOELTNER: And that was a secret ballot conducted by the people?

BENTON: Not only secret, but it's done by machines.

NOELTNER: Would you explain that to us, Senator?

BENTON: Well the voter goes into a little booth, really not too much larger than a telephone booth. When he pulls the lever, the curtain closes and leaves him in that booth completely alone and by himself. He then decides on the ticket in front of him which party he wants to vote for, if he wants to vote for a party. There are three parties in my State, Republican, Democrat, and Socialist. We have a Mayor of Bridgeport, who's very famous and has been Mayor for over 20 years, who is a Socialist. He always runs for Governor, or in years -- every other election -- when we don't have a Governor, because we elect a Governor for a four-year term, then he runs for Senator. Out of 1,100,000 votes he will poll about 12,000. This will interest many of the countries listening to your broadcast as the fact that the Socialists are welcome here. They are on the ballot in my State; they have a Mayor of one of our important cities, because of Republican and Democratic voters, who think he's a good man, but when he runs for Governor he only gets 12,000 votes out of a 1,100,000 cast. The rest go to the

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Republicans and Democrats, and then the voter has to decide whether he will vote what we call the straight ticket, that means vote solid Republican or Democratic. I don't know how many people do that, but I would guess that probably half the people don't do that. They will vote for most candidates in one party, but they will have some candidates in the other party.

NOELTNER: They will have a preference that they would like to make rather than voting along straight party lines.

BENTON: So they may vote for a Democrat for U.S. Senator-- or look at my own case: they voted for Eisenhower for President, but 41,000 then voted for me, as a Democrat, for the United States Senate. People in the countries that listen to your broadcasts think that our two parties are much more different in ideological terms than they actually are. Thus, the Socialist and Conservative Parties in England differ infinitely more in ideology than do the Republicans and the Democrats.

NOELTNER: But there still is a difference between the Republicans and the Democrats in this country, basically?

BENTON: First: there isn't any difference in my State locally, in any of the cities. When you get to city politics it is a competition between groups of men, each trying to prove to the electorate that it can do a better job running the Police Department, collecting garbage, building new schools, and there isn't any ideology to quarrel about. It's efficiency. Rarely, on occasion, it is corruption. But it's efficiency. Now, as you go up the line, there begin to be differences that wouldn't be called ideological in the European

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sense but that we would call ideological, perhaps, in our sense. Thus the Democratic party is not divided on foreign policy to the extent that the Republican Party is though Eisenhower has done a great deal to unify the Republican Party. Of course we Democrats claim that he has done this by adopting lock, stock, and barrel the Democratic foreign policy. We are proud that he has. We think we had a good policy under President Truman. We are glad that President Eisenhower took it over. There are a lot of things that he and Secretary Dulles aren't doing to our satisfaction, but it's not because of differences in ideology -- it's differences of opinion on how much you should spend for one thing or another; whether we are putting enough money or too little money into the Air Corps; whether President Eisenhower was taken in by the Russians last summer in Geneva with their spirit-of-Geneva slogan; whether Secretary Dulles isn't kidding us when he tells us that the Russians are doing less well than some of ^{us} think they are in building up their industrial plant; and other subjects of this kind. But there's no difference between the two parties in our estimation of the Soviet threat; there's no difference between the two parties in the determination of each to build up the free world. So on the big things the two parties see eye to eye, even in domestic policies. They may quarrel tremendously, but normally only temporarily, because when one party or the other wins out, in the next election you're likely to find that the law that's just been passed becomes part of the platform of the opposing party. They're family quarrels. They have

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nothing to do with the pattern of French and Italian politics. And I find when I visit these countries, as I do often, I have great difficulty explaining this great difference in pattern to my French and Italian friends -- just to take two countries as an example.

NOELTNER: One thing that I would like to touch on right now, still connected with the Senate and the representatives of the people of this country: we have a Congressional Record printed --

BENTON: It prints every word that happens in both Houses of Congress. There are crack stenographers there who take every word down, every word is printed so every one can see and know every single thing that is said in Congress.

NOELTNER: For the public and for the Senators themselves.

BENTON: For anybody who wants it. Of course, if you are a Senator you get it for nothing.

NOELTNER: As you know Senator, 50 years ago Russia's first parliament, the State Duma, was established; and in this the Russian people experienced the first vestiges of representative government. What do you think would be necessary--

BENTON: I may interrupt to say that it gave the liberal groups in Russia at that time great hope that Russia would democratize and liberalize as had England, and that the power of the Czar and the tyranny of the Czar would be liberalized-- and important steps were taken in that direction. If the Czar hadn't been a weak leader with a lot of grave personal and domestic problems, and if the first World War hadn't come along, I believe that the Duma -- which grew out of the

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1905 revolution, which the Communists of course say is the antecedent revolution to their 1917 revolution -- that the Duma would have prospered. The small conspiratorial minority, of course, came in in 1917 and wrecked the Duma. You know, they were the minority. They lost the elections held after they seized power, they lost them overwhelmingly; and then they dissolved and abolished the Duma and put this form of representation for the people of Russia -- they put it into oblivion.

NOELTNER: Senator, what do you think would be necessary, or a necessary prerequisite, for the re-establishment of a representative form of government in the Soviet Union?

BENTON: Well, that's too tough a question for me -- because I don't believe in murder and assassination as a form of political activity.

NOELTNER: Absolutely no.

BENTON: I don't know, because the chances of converting these top Russians that have the control don't seem very good. I talked to 40 or 50 of them in Russia and I admit they are able men, formidable men, but they did seem to me to be indoctrinated men and (I would go so far about many of them as to say) by Western standards, ignorant men. So I don't believe you are going to sit down with Bulganin and Khrushchev and persuade them to start a truly representative legislature. Now, at best, most hopefully, this may come through their successors. Lots of pressures are developing in Russia-- the Russian people haven't changed any; they are a great and brilliant and creative

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people and a tough people -- and these pressures are mounting. We see them in many statements by Khrushchev, his recent concessions (though not much has been done about them) for higher wages, pensions, and shorter hours. You can be absolutely sure these are the resultsof pressures that are permeating Russia. Political pressures can be developed also. Some of us in this country find ground for cautious optimism about the development of political democracy in one area -- which is an area of real achievement for the Bolsheviks and the Communists -- and this is the accelerating development of their educational system. The boys and girls go to school more. They learn more and study more. Well, we believe in the West that this means they will begin to think more for themselves. As they think more for themselves, as the pressures develop, we can have hope of the development of representative government under the Communists as it came under the Czars. Whether it will need a big or a little revolution to get it, none of us know. These are questions -- as Carl Sandburg, our great poet says -- these are questions. Even our experts don't pretend, or the Russian experts, to have the answers to them.

NOELTNER: Prior to your term in the Senate, Senator, you also served the U.S. Government in the role of Assistant Secretary of State from 1945 to 1947. Just exactly what were your duties in that position?

BENTON: We in the United States don't like the word "propaganda," and we don't believe in it. But the power and insistence of the Russian

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propaganda had terrified us, and the Cominform had terrified us, and the Russian plan for World Revolution had startled us. I think "terrified" is too strong a word to use about the Cominform, because most Americans didn't even know there was such a thing. There haven't been enough Communists... well, there have been so few Communists in the United States. I never have met one and most Americans have never seen one. Twenty-five or thirty thousand out of 160,000,000 people are pretty hard to identify. But the propaganda was being pumped in on us by the Soviet Union, all over the world, and we felt that we should recognize this and reply to it. I was brought into the State Department as the war ended to take over the great war agencies that had developed in the field of information and propaganda: one for Latin America and the other for the rest of the world. They had grown out of the necessities of war. There were values in them that we felt should be carried over into peacetime. We want the Russian people to get the news, the straight news -- and the people in the satellite countries if we can get it to them. My job was to try to set up an organization to do that. And we succeeded in those years in the State Department in persuading Congress that this was necessary; we established our radio broadcasts, which we called the "Voice of America." I helped establish and pick that name for them. We started our programs of exchange of students, professors, scientists. We opened libraries with our books and magazines and

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newspapers available throughout the world. We of course called this an information program. I use the word "propaganda" so some of your hearers will understand it and of course the word "propaganda" in the Latin countries doesn't have the sinister connotation it has in English.

NOELTNER: I certainly want to thank you very much for appearing before our Radio Liberation microphone, Senator Benton.

BENTON: It's a privilege and opportunity and I congratulate you and others of Radio Liberation on your leadership in this much needed activity.

NOELTNER: Thank you.